

(Waco, Texas) –U.S. Representative Chet Edwards today joined Waco Mayor Virginia DuPuy, Tom Smith, Director of Central Texas VA, representatives of Sen. Cornyn and Sen. Hutchison, General Robert Shoemaker (ret.), Mark Cornell (National Blind Veterans Association Secretary) and local veterans to break ground on the Blind Rehabilitation Center at the Waco VA hospital.

Edwards, Chairman of the House Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee, secured \$49 million in VA funds to renovate buildings on the Waco VA campus.

The Blind Rehab building has received \$9.8 million of those funds for renovations, and is one of only 10 VA blind rehab programs nationwide.

The following are Congressman Edwards' full remarks as prepared for delivery:

Good morning. Director Smith, thank you for your kind introduction and for all that you and the Central Texas VA employees do for our veterans every day.

Mayor DuPuy, and to all of our distinguished guests, including Nick Schroeder with Senator Hutchison and Sandy Edwards with Senator Cornyn, and to our real VIPs, our

veterans, including General Bob Shoemaker, 4-star Army soldier retired, and Mark Cornell, the Secretary of the National Blind Veterans Association, thank you for being here today.

The Waco VA hospital has received a lot of attention over the past several years for being a Center of Excellence for mental health care. That's appropriate because our nation has learned that the mental wounds of war are often as painful and long-lasting as the physical wounds of war.

Today, we celebrate the hidden jewel of the Waco VA—the blind rehabilitation program. Few people, even in our community, would know that the Waco VA houses one of only ten VA blind rehab programs in the nation, but the veterans and troops who have come through this program will never forget it.

Try closing your eyes for a minute, an hour or a day. Only then could many of us even begin to understand what it is like to have lost one's vision. Only then could we understand how blindness could change our lives forever. Only then could we fully appreciate the sacrifice of those who have lost their vision in military service to country and how important this blind rehab program is in helping them rebuild their lives.

While we with the ability to see cannot fully put ourselves in the shoes of those facing blindness, I have to believe we all share the common bond of responsibility to help our blinded vets help themselves as they regain their independence.

It is only right that those who served to protect our nation's independence have a chance to rebuild their own independence in their day to day lives.

That is what today is all about. By expanding patient beds by a third, from 15 to 20, more veterans from throughout our region of the country can move forward with their lives more quickly. By modernizing the blind rehab facilities, our VA employees will be able to provide more effective and efficient training and care.

Veterans who have sacrificed so much for our country deserve the best, and that is what

they will receive in the Waco VA blind rehabilitation program.

This building is just that, a building. It is the hard work and dedication of the employees who work here that will really make a difference in the lives of our veterans. Nevertheless, I hope this new building will stand as a strong statement that our nation will always stand up for those who have stood up for us.

May God bless all who will work here and all who will receive care here, and may God bless the nation they have made so great by their service and sacrifice. Thank you.

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